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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001722

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO  
P FOR DRUSSELL RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALIZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLEBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: TASHNAQ AVAILABLE FOR COURTING, SAAD NOT INTERESTED

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Tashnaq has not decided with whom it will ally for the 2009 elections and is open to any option that will help it meet its goal of winning a five MP bloc, a senior Tashnaq MP told DCM. During the recent trip by a Tashnaq delegation to Syria, president Assad was very interested in Lebanese election politics and also said Syrian cooperation with the Special Tribunal depended on the signing of an undefined "protocol". End Summary.

TASHNAQ OPEN TO MARCH 14, BUT HARIRI NOT INTERESTED

2. (C) It would be an error to interpret the December 1 visit to Damascus by a delegation from Lebanon's Armenian Tashnaq party as a sign that Tashnaq has firmly decided to stay allied with the pro-Syrian opposition for the 2009 Lebanese elections, Tashnaq leader and MP agop Pakradonian asserted to DCM on December 3. "Our target is to get five MPs; whoever helps us, we will ally with them", he said. Pakradonian indicated that Tashnaq is open to all options for alliances, including being part of an independent bloc of MPs or allying with March 14, if it served Tashnaq's parliamentary objective.

3. (C) While opposition figure Michel Aoun has been courting Tashnaq, March 14 leader Saad Hariri has not, Pakradonian said with a tone of regret. "I see Saad at the National Dialogue and he kisses me and says we should meet" but then nothing happens. In addition, Hariri is financing a rival Armenian politician named Nariq Abrahamian to challenge the Tashnaq party, Pakradonian complained. Ambassador asked Hariri about a possible alliance with Tashnaq when she saw him the following day, December 4. Hariri was firmly negative, saying he did not trust them. They will join us for the election and then undermine us after we have abandoned our own candidates, Saad explained.

4. (C) Pakradonian expressed some ambivalence about senior Greek Orthodox political figure Michel Murr, with whom Tashnaq has long been allied. Discussing the possibility of his party being part of an independent bloc, Pakradonian had a negative view of what he sees as Murr's lobbying to be the nominal head of such a bloc. On the other hand, he said that

Tashnaq would support Murr for parliament even if they are on opposing lists, given the longtime relationship the two have had.

15. (C) Pakradonian said that during the meeting in Damascus with Bashar Assad, much of it a discussion of Lebanese politics, the Syrian president passed what Pakradonian interpreted as a clear message encouraging visits by "the Murrs"; Michel Murr and his son, Defense Minister Elias Murr. (Note: Elias Murr has said publicly he would travel to Syria in his Defense Minister role, following recent visits by other GOL officials. Michel Murr has not announced any plan to travel to Syria).

16. (C) When asked about timing of Tashnaq's decision on how it will ally itself for the election, Pakradonian thought for a moment and responded "By mid-February".

CONTACTS WITH ARMENIAN-AMERICANS,  
ESPECIALLY FOR CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS  
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17. (C) DCM asked about Tashnaq's contacts with Armenian-American groups. Pakradonian said the party has some contact with the Armenian National Council in Los Angeles and Washington, but the Council is not responsive to Tashnaq's inquiries, which he attributed its focus on Armenia and Turkey issues. He admitted, however, that Tashnaq would be approaching the Lebanese Armenian community in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere for donations for the 2009 electoral campaign, which he expected to be very costly compared to

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other years.

TASHNAQ'S MEETING WITH BASHAR ASSAD  
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8.(C) Pakradonian said the SARG had been lobbying for a Tashnaq trip to Syria for some time, and the party agreed to send a delegation before the trip by Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, which began December 3. It was the party's first contact with the Syrian government since Syria withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, he said. During the meeting, Assad told the group he expected the election to be close and it will be hard for the victors to govern without cooperation of other parties, so all parties in Lebanon need to be on good terms. Assad floated the idea of March 14 and the March 8/Aoun opposition agreeing on consensus candidates in certain districts, Pakradonian claimed.

9.(C) In response, the Tashnaq delegation told Assad its objective is to get a parliamentary bloc of five MPs and told him frankly it does not want Syria to suggest Armenian candidates whom Tashnaq could not accept. Assad was receptive.

SARG WANTS A "PROTOCOL" FOR SYRIAN COOPERATION  
WITH SPECIAL TRIBUNAL?  
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10.(C) On other issues, Assad told the delegation that Syria insisted on signing a "protocol" regarding possible Syrian cooperation with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Without such a protocol, Syria would not send persons to give testimony at the Tribunal, Assad said. Discussing Syria's relations with Iran, Assad said something to the effect that "they have their position; we have ours". He confirmed that Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia were not good.

SISON